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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: SARG CLOSES TWO BORDER CROSSING TO LEBANON

Classified By: A/DCM William V. Roebuck for reasons 1.5 b/d

11. (U) On May 20, the Syrian Ministry of Interior released a statement announcing it had temporarily closed the two northern border crossings with Lebanon, al-Aridha and al-Dabbousiyah, "until the situation in Northern Lebanon becomes secure." It is unclear how long the crossing points will remain closed but Syrian contacts don't expect the border to return to normal until the fighting in Tripoli ends. The crossing remains closed as of mid-afternoon local time May 21.

12. (C) Fatah Islam is a group that has only recently surfaced publicly here. Former Syrian VP Abdel Halim Khaddam's web site asserts that Syrian intelligence services created Shaker al-Absi led-Fatah Islam. In addition, Embassy contacts in the human rights and civil society field, who are generally distrustful of the SARG, assert that the Syrian security services were directly behind sending Arab militants to Palestinian refugee camps in northern Lebanon last year (especially in the wake of fighting between Israel and Hizbullah), a movement that reportedly helped trigger the creation of Fatah Islam. Local and regional media reports picked up the arrival of approximately 200 Arab militants in a Palestinian refugee camp shortly before Fatah Islam's reported split with Fatah Intifada in autumn 2006. Some of our other Syrian interlocutors, however, have been less certain of the group's affiliations, with most asserting the group has a loose ideological affiliation with al-Qaida and no direct link with SARG security services. AFP reported May 13 a clash with several casualties between the Syrian army and Fatah Islam members who were trying to cross the border into Iraq. In addition, Syria arrested Abu Khaled al-Oumleh, according to media reports, the number two in Fatah Intifada, who is thought have played a major role in the establishment of Fatah Islam. Syrian authorities released Oumleh in early 2007, however, after his expulsion from Fatah Intifada, according to media reports.

13. (C) Comment. The SARG has given greater media coverage recently to visits by Lebanese politicians to Damascus in an apparent attempt to portray itself as working actively for a political solution to the current crisis. At the same time, the SARG has long made clear its determination to oppose the establishment of the Hariri tribunal. Its officials have repeatedly voiced worries and concerns about the potential for foreign "intervention" in Lebanon (whether passage/implementation of UNSCR 1701 or UNSC Chapter VII action on the Hariri Tribunal) to spark instability or

possibly al-Qaida attacks. The "worries" that SARG officials expressed sounded to some here more like threats than concerns. While the SARG's agenda in Lebanon is undoubtedly aided by the timing of the current fighting in Tripoli, we have not seen any compelling evidence to date linking Fatah Islam to the SARG. We have, however, continued to hear reports over the past two years that the SARG has increased its surreptitious efforts to support Sunni Islamist militants in northern Lebanon. It is as yet unclear to what degree this SARG border closure is designed to shape events in Lebanon, including the recent fighting. In the past two years, such border closures extended far beyond the pretextual events that provoked them, and were used by the SARG to mount pressure against the Siniora government.

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